Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 33 | Issue 2 Article 8

4-1-2016

Palmer, ed., LIBERTARIAN FREE WILL: CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

Allison Krile Thornton

reasons-responsive mechanism that an agent needs in order to be responsible. Chapter 12 addresses a challenge from Manuel Vargas concerning the plausibility of employing *tracing* in a theory of moral responsibility—"tracing" being the idea that an agent will often be responsible for something at a time in virtue of having had control at an earlier time. Fischer's responses here are clear and persuasive, although as he himself recognises, there are some substantial issues to do with how one should individuate reasons-responsive mechanisms which are left unresolved. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Fischer's account of moral responsibility is one of the most sophisticated ever developed and as such demands attention from all who write on such issues. All in all, this is a strong collection of essays that deserves serious study.

Libertarian Free Will: Contemporary Debates, ed. David Palmer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 248 pages. $90 (hardback).

ALLISON KRILE THORNTON, Baylor University/University of Notre Dame

Libertarian Free Will: Contemporary Debates is a collection of ten new essays on libertarianism about free will, specifically as it has been defended by Robert Kane, a prominent contemporary defender of the view. In addition to the essays, the collection includes a substantive introduction by the editor, David Palmer, and a clear and compelling final chapter in which Kane replies to his critics. Kane's contribution to the volume is especially valuable. He both illuminates his critics' arguments and uses the occasion to clarify, defend, and develop his view in important ways. Throughout, Kane models productive philosophical exchange. In what follows, I discuss a central thesis from each chapter and highlight Kane's response to it.

In Part I, "Libertarian Theories of Free Will," Carl Ginet and Timothy O'Connor discuss versions of libertarianism that differ according to what (if anything) causes free and responsible actions. According to Kane, events are the causes (though in his reply to O'Connor's chapter 3 of this volume, he makes an important addendum). In chapters 2 and 3 respectively, Ginet and O'Connor defend alternatives: non-causalist and agent-causalist accounts respectively.

In "Can an Indeterministic Cause Leave a Choice Up to the Agent?," Ginet argues for the view that an agent's free and responsible actions are not caused because, on his view, if such actions were caused (even indeterministically), they would be produced by antecedent circumstances, and if they were produced by antecedent circumstances, they would "[have] to be viewed as

pp. 239–245 FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY Vol. 33 No. 2 April 2016
doi: 10.5840/faithphil201633262

'decided' by those antecedent conditions and not by the agent" (24). Thus if an action were caused, it could not be up to an agent. But if an action is not up to an agent, then the agent cannot freely and responsibly perform it. In reply, Kane denies that indeterministic causal influence of antecedent circumstances on an action hampers an agent's freedom and responsibility in performing that action. He argues that choices can be causally influenced by antecedent circumstances, while also being "caused or brought about by the agent, in particular by the agent's making an effort to bring it about and succeeding in that effort" (202).

In chapter 3, "Free Will and Metaphysics," O'Connor argues that when Kane's account is "set within a plausible general metaphysical framework, Kane's theory and the agent-causal theory [with which Kane's theory is intended to contrast] are much closer than has so far been recognized" (28). To show this, O'Connor draws out two metaphysical commitments of Kane's account of free will: first, that mental states are ontologically irreducible; second, that causation is nonreductive. O'Connor thinks that the best version of a view that has these commitments is a neo-Aristotelian causal powers account where what has the causal powers are substances (or agents). His reasons are twofold. First, "it becomes natural to understand causes as substances" once we "abandon these Humean deflationary projects" (33)—which the second metaphysical commitment requires. Second, such an account avoids the problem of the disappearing agent. But as Kane points out in his reply to O'Connor, that all causation is substance causation does not *follow* from the aforementioned metaphysical commitments, and Kane has reasons—independent of reductivism—for maintaining that some causes are events. Moreover, he argues that the occurrence of event causation does not rule out the occurrence of agent causation and so does not alone create the problem of the disappearing agent. In fact, according to Kane, one need not choose between the two sorts of causation and might even be "tempted to say that my view is not merely EC (event causal) but [AC] agent-causal *and* event causal or AC/EC (if that didn't sound too much like a rock group)" (206, emphasis added).

Part II, "The Luck Objection," addresses the luck objection to libertarianism. By way of background, the objection is that if (as libertarianism requires) our actions are not determined, then what actions we perform is a matter of luck in a way that undermines our freedom and responsibility. Kane admits that what actions we perform is a matter of luck on libertarianism, but he denies that such luck undermines our freedom and responsibility. In response to the luck objection, Kane argues that an agent can be free and responsible for deciding to A as long as she was trying to decide to A, "endorse[s] the outcome as something she was trying and wanting to do all along" (37), and decides to A in the face of some indeterminacy about deciding to A. These three conditions are met in some cases of dual efforts, which are cases where an agent simultaneously tries to make each of two competing choices or decisions and succeeds in making one of them. In such cases, Kane argues, no matter which of the competing decisions the

agent ends up making, she will have been free in so deciding even though whichever decision she makes is a matter of luck.

In chapter 4, "Kane, Luck, and Control: Trying to Get By without Too Much Effort," Alfred Mele takes issue with this reply to the luck objection. Mele notes an additional condition that must be met in dual efforts cases in order for the agent to decide freely: the agent's dual efforts must themselves be freely made. The agent must *freely* try to decide to A, for example, or else her decision to A (if it comes to that) will not itself be freely made. The problem, argues Mele, is that this introduces a vicious regress. In order for an agent to decide freely to A, she must have freely tried to decide to A. And in order to freely try to decide to A, she must (per Kane's answer to the luck objection) have freely tried to try to decide to A, and so on, ad infinitum. But whether someone *can* so freely try is an illegitimate assumption given the question under dispute. Kane's reply is that the kind of control an agent is required to have over the effort to decide to A (if she is to be free in deciding to A) can be "*a compatibilist kind of control*" (200). This stops the regress, but, as Mele points out, it introduces another worry: if the freedom of trying to decide to A is compatibilist, and the freedom of deciding to A is incompatibilist, then somehow the freedom of deciding to A "outstrips" the freedom of the effort.

In addition to the worries Mele highlights in chapter 4, there are two residual worries for a libertarian reply to the luck objection, worries that John Martin Fischer addresses in chapter 5, "Toward a Solution to the Luck Problem." These worries (brought to light by Peter van Inwagen and Alfred Mele respectively) are that under the assumption of causal indeterminism, first, it is not the agent who makes the crucial difference as to what she does, and second, we cannot give an explanation of why an agent chooses as she actually chooses rather than choosing otherwise. These worries should be troubling to a libertarian because they suggest that causal indeterminism rules out a responsibility-grounding relationship between an agent's prior states and her choices. But Fischer defends the libertarian against these concerns. He develops a Frankfurt-style example that shows that indeterminism (and the unavailability of a contrastive explanation that might come with it) is compatible with an agent having the sort of control required for moral responsibility. In his example, which he calls the "Random Machine Example," there is a deterministic world in which an agent makes a choice for which she is morally responsible. That is, in that world, the responsibility-grounding relationship between the agent's prior states and her choice obtains. In the example, there is another world, too, like the deterministic world up to the agent's choice in all ways but one: in this other world, there is machine that makes the world indeterministic. The machine can be in a certain internal state, M1, and if it is, there are two possibilities, each with an equal chance of occurring. The first possibility is that the machine goes to sleep and triggers no causal interaction with the world. The second is that it initiates a causal sequence that would preempt the agent from making the choice she made

in the first, deterministic world. In Fischer's example, in the indeterministic world, the random machine runs through its internal states, ends up in M1, and then goes to sleep, so that in both worlds, the agent chooses and does exactly the same thing as a result of relevantly similar processes. Fischer argues that even though the second world is indeterministic, the agent is still morally responsible, for "presumably, the mere existence and operation of the machine in [the indeterministic world] should not in any way threaten these claims about the responsibility-grounding relationship" (61). Kane notes that the Random Machine Example reconciles indeterminism with only a *semicompatibilist* view of moral responsibility, and he argues that on his view, he can reconcile indeterminism with a stronger libertarian view of ultimate moral responsibility (see 195–197).

In Part III, "Incompatibilism and Omissions," Michael McKenna (chapter 6) and David Widerker and Ira M. Schnall (chapter 7) address two different arguments for incompatibilism, specifically Kane's preferred "source" or "ultimacy" argument and a "direct" argument respectively. In chapter 8, Randolph Clarke considers whether the freedom we supposedly have in refraining from acting is threatened by incompatibilism or compatibilism.

Kane's ultimacy argument for incompatibilism depends on these premises: (1) an agent acts freely only if she is the ultimate source of her act, and (2) if determinism is true, no one is the ultimate source of her acts. On Kane's understanding of ultimacy, someone is the ultimate source of her act only if her act has no sufficient ground, cause, or explanation for which the agent herself is not responsible. On this understanding of ultimacy, (2) is clearly true. In "Compatibilist Ultimacy: Resisting the Threat of Kane's U Condition," however, McKenna doubts that Kane's understanding of ultimacy is the one we ought to have. Unlike many compatibilists, he grants that there is *something* to the idea that freely acting agents need to be the ultimate sources of their acts, but he argues that to the extent that that idea is plausible, whatever "ultimate" means is something that is compatible with determinism. He argues that the notion of being an ultimate source is context-sensitive and that in most of those contexts, something can be an ultimate source even if determinism is true. For example, we say that a certain spring in France is the ultimate source of Perrier drinking water, and yet we don't think that whether we're right about that depends on whether determinism is false. Similarly, McKenna argues, in the context of ordinary discourse, an agent can be the ultimate source of her actions even if determinism is true. Kane denies that ordinary discourse is the proper context for evaluating whether an agent is morally responsible. According to Kane, in the proper context for evaluating whether an agent can in principle be held praiseworthy or blameworthy, "it *does* matter whether the agent is personally responsible . . . for becoming the sort of person she is now with the will she has, or whether the formation of that will is entirely traceable to factors the origins of which she had no role in producing" (182).

In chapter 7, "The Direct Argument for Incompatibilism," Widerker and Schnall defend a version of Peter van Inwagen's Direct Argument for

incompatibilism (DA) in which the key premise, the so-called "Transfer of Non-Responsibility Rule" (TNR), is that if one is not responsible for p and one is not responsible for its being the case that (p entails q), then one is not responsible for q. (More precisely, the principle is: p, and if p and no one is [now] or ever has been even partly morally responsible for the fact that p, and [p entails q], and no one is [now] or ever has been even partly morally responsible for the fact that [p entails q], then q and no one is [now] or ever has been even partly morally responsible for the fact that q.) Widerker and Schnall argue that DA is dialectically superior to Kane's preferred source-based argument for incompatibilism because Kane's argument, unlike DA, depends on the controversial (and straightforwardly incompatibilist) assumption that an agent is responsible for her act only if she is the ultimate source of it (that is, only if the act has no sufficient ground, cause, or explanation for which the agent herself is not responsible). But Kane denies that DA has this dialectical advantage. He argues that, in defense of TNR, Widerker and Schnall appeal to the same controversial point. Widerker and Schnall, for example, argue that TNR is supported by the fact that we would find it puzzling were someone to maintain that an agent (say, Mary) is responsible for an event (say, John's death) even though Mary is responsible neither for events leading up to John's death nor for the fact that those events entail John's death. But, Kane argues, that we find the allegation puzzling presupposes the very assumption of which DA was claimed to be independent. Thus, while Kane acknowledges the success of much of Widerker and Schnall's defense of DA, he denies that DA has the purported dialectical advantage over his own source-based argument.

In chapter 8, "Freedom, Responsibility, and Omitting to Act," Clarke addresses the topic of moral responsibility for omissions, developing "the skeleton" (121) of a view about the conditions under which an agent is responsible for omitting to act. On Clarke's view, whether an agent is directly morally responsible for omitting to act on some occasion depends on whether she freely omits to act then, and whether she freely omits to act is constituted by at least some (and maybe all) of the following factors: that she freely decides not to do the thing in question, that her intention not to act plays the right kind of causal role, and that she was able to perform the omitted action. Clarke intends for the agent's ability to perform the omitted action to be understood in such a way that his account of freely omitting to act is "silent on whether the requisite freedom in omitting is compatible with determinism" (122). Kane, however, fleshes out Clarke's view in a way that renders it a strictly incompatibilist account: Kane argues that in order for an agent to be directly morally responsible for omitting to act, she needs to have plural voluntary control over the omission (i.e., she needs to have been able to perform the omitted act voluntarily and intentionally), and that kind of control is incompatible with determinism.

In Part IV, "The Significance of Free Will," the authors take up the question of the significance of libertarian free will—why so many people

have wanted it and why anyone should. In other work, Kane's general approach to answering the significance question is to argue that libertarian free will is valuable because it is required for many other things we value, like moral responsibility, being the suitable object of reactive attitudes, and genuine love and personal relationships.

Though he does not go so far as to defend libertarian free will, in "Responsibility for Emotions, Alternative Possibilities, and Reasons," Ishtiyaque Haji argues that for many things we value, like the attitudes of forgiveness and guilt, there is at least an alternative possibilities requirement. Such attitudes require alternative possibilities because having them depends on our ability to act in accordance with what Haji calls "objective *pro tanto* reasons." (For example, forgiving someone requires having as a reason "being willing to cease to regard the wrong done as a reason to weaken or dissolve the relationship " [138].) And in order to act in accordance with such reasons, it must be possible not only for us to so act but also to refrain from so acting. That is, we must have alternative possibilities. Thus, since some things we value like forgiveness and guilt depend on being able to act in accordance with reasons, many things we value depend on there being alternative possibilities. Kane adds two qualifications: (1) that alternative possibilities are not required for *every* morally obligated act, but only that acts by which we engage in self-formation; and (2) that in such acts, we have plural voluntary control over the alternatives.

In "Moral Responsibility, the Reactive Attitudes, and the Significance of (Libertarian) Free Will," Dana Kay Nelkin advocates for an approach to the significance question that she takes to contrast with Kane's. She suggests that to answer it, we start by considering "what is at stake" in the debate (such as moral responsibility, reactive attitudes, and personal relationships), explore whether those things really are valuable, and then, if they are, establish whether they depend on libertarian free agency. While Kane sees this strategy as a part of his own approach and not an alternative to it (210), Nelkin's focus on the value of what is at stake is important. She argues that some valuable and important kinds of personal relationships, like those between friends, spouses, and parents and children, are defined by the reactive attitudes that people in those relationships are disposed to have towards one another. These reactive attitudes, Nelkin argues, presuppose that people have placed certain demands on one another. The reactive attitudes of resentment or indignation, for instance, presuppose that certain demands have been held to someone but not met. This relates to the significance question because it seems that holding-to-demands in turn presupposes the free agency of the target of the reactive attitude. It thus seems that there are particular, important kinds of personal relationships that presuppose free agency. Nelkin is neutral on whether the agency required is *libertarian* free agency in particular, but Kane, of course, argues that it must be.

Derk Pereboom, in the "Dialectic of Selfhood and the Significance of Free Will," agrees with Kane that holding each other to certain demands

is both essential to some important kinds of human relationships and that it presupposes libertarian free agency. Unlike Kane, however, he is skeptical that those kinds of relationships are possible. He argues that much of their importance can be retained even if they are not possible via similar relationships that presuppose "a notion of demand that does not require the ability to do otherwise and a sensitivity to which does not require the reactive attitudes" (168). The notion he identifies is the demand of axiological recommendation (e.g., "You ought to stop abusing me or it will destroy our relationship"). In contrast with the demand of moral obligation, which Nelkin's account of personal relationships requires, the demand of axiological recommendation is consistent with the agent who is the target of the demand not being able to do otherwise. A failure to meet this sort of demand does not—or should not—engender reactive attitudes. For this reason, the kinds of personal relationships Pereboom gives an account of seem less valuable and important than the ones discussed by Nelkin and Kane. Pereboom admits that we would lose *something* if he is right about the nature of personal relationships, but he argues that the loss is not very significant. A disavowal of reactive attitudes in our personal relationships would not preclude having personal but non-reactive attitudes, like disappointment, sadness, and hurt feelings. And relationships characterized by susceptibility to those non-reactive attitudes *are* especially valuable, and, according to Pereboom, they are valuable enough.

While the collection is limited in scope insofar as it targets only one variety of libertarianism, the authors discuss a sufficiently wide range of topics and perspectives that the volume would be a valuable addition to a graduate seminar on free will. Moreover, as one of the only volumes devoted to libertarianism, it makes for an efficient but thorough introduction to the contemporary debate surrounding libertarianism.[1]

[1]Thanks to Chris Tweedt and Brandon Warmke for comments on an earlier draft of this review.

Free Will in Philosophical Theology, by Kevin Timpe. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 177 pages. $120.00 (hardcover).

JOSEF QUITTERER, University of Innsbruck

Free will is essential for Christian faith. Without free will, there would be no sin, no guilt, and no moral responsibility. The Christian doctrine of salvation through divine forgiveness and through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ would be meaningless without free will. On the other hand, the Christian

doi: 10.5840/faithphil201633263